

House Committee on Commerce

HB 5804 – December 3, 2014

Good morning. My name is Brian Doy Baker and I live in Mount Pleasant. I'm here because of a great organization called PFLAG: "Parents, Family, Friends and Allies United with LGBTQ People." PFLAG is a place where parents can find advice and wisdom that can help them understand their children when they discover their child's sexual orientation or gender identity is not what they expected. It's an organization that welcomes all. When our younger son told us he was gay, we realized our acceptance of his sexual orientation would determine his acceptance of himself – and that more than ever, our love for him was crucial.

Our involvement in PFLAG gave us opportunities to meet and talk with a wide variety of people, including transgender. Their struggles, and obstacles they faced, were different from our son's, but their innate humanity and worth were the same. Like our son, their potential to face problems was not because of their difference, but because other people did not understand that difference.

All human beings are born with the potential to love another person. But who we find attractive is not something we decide for ourselves. That script is written for us. It's something we discover as we approach adulthood. To allow ignorance and prejudice based on something innate is a mistake.

As a father I am proud of my son – as proud as any parent. My boy's sexual orientation worried me, but only because I knew there are bullies in this world. Bullies can be stopped by ordinary people who know how to speak out and intervene. The solution to bullies is for everyone to maintain the same expectation of what's acceptable. But I believe we must begin that by writing those expectations into our laws.

Because of my son's mostly unimportant difference, I have a deeper understanding of other people who face broader prejudice and lack of understanding. That's why I call on you to include gender identity and expression in the protections in our civil rights laws. If those words aren't there, our schools and civic institutions won't spend the time to protect them. With the potential for bullying and other prejudices, laws must have those protections spelled out.

At PFLAG I met a transgender woman who wanted to start a new business. She needed licensing and to obtain it she was planning to go back in the closet for a few months. To start a business, you have to hide who you are inside?

A young man I know wasn't sure he would have his family's support if he told them he was gay. His employer offered to let him sleep in their store if his family threw him out. So if you're gay and not yet able to support yourself, keep your mouth shut.

If you wonder what a transgender teen looks like, go to any homeless shelter in New York City. There are thousands there. Thousands. The National Center for Transgender Equality says of 1.6 million homeless youth, 20-40% are LGBT.

If you're transgender and have been kicked out of your home, shelters will expect you to behave as if you're not transgender – so don't tell the truth or you'll be on the street.

It's not enough for federal housing regulations to give protection. Law determines behavior. State Law sets standards for the State's citizens. The compulsory nature of Law has the effect of forcing us to consider what's right. If you include sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, you will save lives and protect children from prejudice, and ultimately violence. If you don't, you will by omission allow bullying to continue.

I'm proud that my home town and the township that surrounds it both have ordinances prohibiting discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity and expression. I helped canvass my own neighborhood and we found such protection for jobs and housing had the support of 82% of registered voters. But there are efforts here in the Michigan House to circumvent ordinances like ours, and that's a case of the state denying our city the freedom to decide for itself what's right.

Our elected leaders have an obligation to protect the few against the whims or wishes of the majority; that's why our nation is a Republic and not a simple Democracy. Institutions always face pressures that force them to guard and conserve their resources. This means school districts and civic governments will not provide protection or make provisions for a misunderstood minority unless they're forced to by that minority's inclusion in the law. My experience as a father has taught me so much about sexual orientation and gender identity that I applaud and welcome this chance to add these protections, but the inclusion of the words "sexual orientation" and "gender identity and expression" is vital. It's time to protect those who are discounted because they are misunderstood. It's time to lead.

Brian Doy Baker

1030 South Dr

Mount Pleasant MI 48858

989-854-6089